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ABSTRACT

This two-page information review explores the controversy over the question of what beginning teachers must know to teach effectively and outlines a tentative definition of "essential knowledge" for first-year teachers. Eleven references are listed. (JD)

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ERIC Digest

WHAT FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

by Devon Griffith

In the past--and even, to some extent, today--many people considered successful teaching a mysterious amalgam of near-religious devotion and intuition--a sort of "secular ministry" (Sykes 1983). However, increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of those to whom they entrust the instruction of their children, citizens are demanding a more specific accounting of the skills required for competent teaching. This public concern about teacher competence has found reflection in several major reports, including the Commission on Excellence in Education's A Nation At Risk. What, then, must teachers know in order to teach effectively? This report explores the controversy surrounding this question and outlines some tentative definitions of "essential knowledge" for first-year teachers.

What problems and limitations are associated with attempts to identify essential knowledge for beginning educators?

The identification of essential knowledge for beginning teachers rests, to some extent, on subjective decisions and generalizations--both of which undermine research credibility. As Griffin (1983) noted, one's definition of essential knowledge depends on the ends one considers desirable--a matter of opinion, not science.

Even if researchers could agree on a set of essential skills, they might find the set only narrowly applicable across a range of teaching situations. Edelfelt (1980) insisted that what works in a given classroom depends somewhat on school and pupil characteristics, faculty compatibility, resources and facilities, and administrative leadership.

Nonetheless, some educators maintain, research offers some basis for identification of essential knowledge. According to Gage (cited in Gibney 1981), "we do have some relationships between teacher behavior and pupil achievement and attitudes on which a scientific basis for the art of teaching may be erected" (p. 1). Edelfelt (1980) conceded that "How teachers . . . behave is more important than what they know . . . ," but added that "behavior must be based on knowing" (pp. 29-30).

How has research defined essential knowledge?

In one effort at a comprehensive definition of essential knowledge (Gibney 1981), a panel of educators was asked to rank 71 "teacher concepts" according to their importance to effective teaching. Of the 37 concepts ranked as "essential" by the panel, the most important were: the ability to give students clear directions and explanations; fairness, tact, compassion, and sound judgment; subject-matter knowledge; and ability and willingness to give students individual help.

Edelfelt's (1980) definition focused on eight roles that beginning teachers must be prepared to fill, including faculty member, member of staff hierarchy, and liaison with parents and public.

Some researchers have argued for more limited definitions of essential knowledge, contending that the time allotted to teacher preparation in most colleges and universities restricts what the public may expect beginning teachers to know. Smith (1982) identified seven elements as basic to teacher preparedness: a rigorous and extensive general education; a thorough grounding in subject matter; knowledge of the societal milieu in which teachers work; understanding of educational history and philosophy; grasp of generic pedagogy relevant in teaching all grades and subjects; fluency in subject- and grade-specific pedagogical components; laboratory knowledge and experience.

Similarly, McDonald (1980) reasoned: "If we are to continue within the constraints which have existed for some time in the preparation of teachers, we must settle for more . . . modest goals." From this angle, McDonald suggested, essential knowledge boils down to the skills needed to survive the transition from campus to classroom.

In contrast to such broad efforts to define essential knowledge, a growing body of research focuses on what beginning teachers must know within specific generic components of teaching--instructional planning, classroom management, etc.

Regarding instructional planning, for example, Clark (1983) stressed the importance of instilling in beginning teachers an understanding of the various types and functions of planning.

Brophy (1983) focused on skills essential to effective classroom management, urging "preventive"

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practices such as "withitness" (monitoring students so that they know the teacher is aware of what is happening) and "overlapping" (being able to do more than one thing at a time when necessary).

How is essential knowledge defined in state teacher certification and evaluation policies?

Increasingly, state teacher certification and evaluation policies hold beginning teachers accountable for knowledge and skills considered essential for effective classroom practice.

South Carolina's Assessment of Performance in Teaching (APT) evaluates beginning teachers in five "performance dimensions." According to this plan, a "competent" beginning teacher "plans learning activities to meet objectives and student needs"; "fulfills instructional responsibilities"; "uses professional classroom management techniques to assist students in learning"; "communicates acceptably"; and "demonstrates a positive attitude toward students and learning" (South Carolina Educator Improvement Task Force 1981). Ellett (1980) described Georgia's performance-based certification plan, which requires would-be teachers to demonstrate skills deemed "minimally essential for successful teaching."

The National Teacher Examinations (NTE), used in some states to evaluate teacher education graduates, reveal another set of assumptions about what first-year teachers must know. Results of a series of national surveys of education professionals, begun in July 1981 by NTE and the Educational Testing Service, indicated broad agreement on the necessity of interpersonal skills, planning and presenting skills, and professional behavior for beginning teachers (Rosner and Grandy 1982).

Summary and Conclusion

Many researchers have questioned the validity and applicability of efforts to define essential knowledge for first-year educators. Despite these criticisms, some educators argue that research does support identification of essential knowledge. The final consensus on essential knowledge--if consensus is possible--may have profound effects upon teacher education. For, as Smith (1982) suggested, if we can answer what a teacher should know upon entry into the profession, "we may define the content of teacher preparation programs in a substantially different fashion . . . " (p. 5).

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